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Ecofeminism and Marxist Ecocriticism in Ursula K. Le Guin’ s The Word for World is Forest ¹

Ursula K. Le Guin’in ‘Dünya’ya Orman Denir’ Adlı Eserinde Ekofeminizm ve Marksist Ekoeleştiri

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ABSTRACT

Expanding hole in the ozone layer, melting icebergs, extinction of species, global warming, threats of famine, earthquakes, droughts, destructive hurricanes, and pandemic diseases are what nature gave in response to civilized man’s constant depletion of the biosphere, wilderness, and destruction of nature and environment. The fictional world of Ursula K. Le Guin’ s, *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972) presents the significance of the protection of nature through characters who possess an ecocentric worldview. Against colonizing Terrans, the eco-friendly inhabitants Athsheans defend the diversity and richness of different forms of interconnected life as a dichotomy to the Terrans anthropocentric attitudes. Athsheans resist against atrocities toward environment and try to make Terrans realize the significance of protection of the planet as they are not masters but an integral part of it. The analysis highlights the causes and effects of systematic destruction and exploitation of nature and environment. Literary approaches such as ecofeminism and Marxist ecocriticism are used to deconstruct anthropocentric and dualistic perspectives of characters as culpable for their ecologically alienated identities and destructive attitudes. Man-interested rationality with its misused science, suicidal technology, and the illusionary mastery is unveiled through an ecocritical perspective. The study also elucidates and diagnoses how the selected text depicts characters who steer away from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Ecocriticism, Marxist Ecocriticism, Ursula K. Le Guin

ÖZET

Ozon tabakasında genişleyen delik, eriyen buzdağları, türlerin yok olması, küresel ısınma, kıtlık tehditleri, depremler, kuraklıklar, yıkıcı kasırgalar, salgın hastalıklar, uyar insanın biyosferi, vahşi yaşamı yıkımı ve sürekli olarak tüketmesine yanıt olarak doğanın verdiği tepkidir. Ursula K. Le Guin’in *Dünya’ya Orman Denir* (1972) adlı kurgusal çalışması, doğanın korunmasının önemini ekosantrik bir dünya görüşüne sahip karakterler aracılığıyla sunmaktadır. Sömürgeci Terranlara karşı, çevre dostu Athshe’liler, Terranların insan merkezli tutumlarına karşı bir ikilem oluşturmaktadır. Athshe’liler birbirine bağlı farklı yaşam biçimlerinin çeşitliliğini ve zenginliğini savunmaktadırlar. Athshe’liler çevreye yönelik vahşete karşı direnir ve Terran’ların gezegenin efendisi değil, ayrılmaz bir parçası oldukları için çevreyi korumanın önemini anlamalarını sağlamaya çalışırlar. Analiz, doğanın ve çevrenin sistematik olarak yok edilmesinin ve sömürülmesinin nedenlerini ve etkilerini ortaya koymaktadır. Ekofeminizm ve Marksist ekoeleştiri gibi edebi yaklaşımlar, ekolojik olarak yabancılaşmış kimlikleri ve yıkıcı tutumlardan dolayı sorumlu karakterlerin antroposentrik ve dualist bakış açılarını yapıbozuma uğratmak için kullanılmaktadır. Yanlış kullanılan bilimi, intihara meyilli teknolojisi ve yanıltıcı ustalığı ile insan odaklı rasyonalite, ekoeleştirel bir bakış açısıyla analiz edilmektedir. Çalışma aynı zamanda seçilen metnin insanmerkezcilikten eko-merkezciliğe yönelen karakterlerin betimlenmesine ışık tutmakta ve teşhis etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ekofeminizm, Ekoeleştiri, Marksist Ekoeleştiri, Ursula K. Le Guin

1. ECOCRITICISM AND ECODEFENSE IN URSULA K. LE GUIN’ S THE WORD FOR WORLD IS FOREST

Ursula K. Le Guin’s fictional novella *The Word for World is Forest* narrates the story of Terran humans and Athshean aliens. Even though the novella was written as a reaction to the Vietnam War, it can also be analyzed from an eco-critical perspective as human’ s interaction with nature is one of the sub-narratives of the novella. Athsheans live a peaceful and ecocentric life and make their living by trading their trees with Earth, where the wood is a highly scarce commodity. The destruction of forests in the World has caused the Terrans to seek wood on another planet: “when they came here there had been nothing: ‘A dark huddle and jumble and tangle of trees’ (Le Guin, 2009, p. 3). For Athshean people, the dark forest is the source of life set up as a dialectical counterpart to Terran modernity, industrialization, and science. For four years, Terrans enslave and have little green fury people work as slaves and personal servants in the camps. Athsheans do not revolt or protest because virtually they do not have a culture of violence, rape, assault, or murder. Instead, they have adopted singing to soothe their anger. An Athshean native, Selver is the only native to think of war and act upon it. The relentless and uncompromising Captain Don Davidson is the leader of humans and embodiment of anthropocentric dualism as he uses violence to

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tame and subjugate Atshean natives. Selver decides to run away from the camp. But Davidson captures him and kills his wife Thele, which prompts an enraged Selver to start a revolt against Terran humans and kills two hundred people in the process. Though Athshean people had no notion of violence until yumens (Terrans) arrived, Selver thinks he must fight back because yumens are spreading their violence in their planet. In the last scene, the Council of the League of Worlds decide to free the Atsheans and ban Terran entrance to Atshean planet for three generations.

Le Guin's novella portrays the abiding and influential manifestation of anthropocentric dualism and characters alienated from nature. The destructive anthropocentrism fleshes out through Captain Davidson, who is an embodiment of the domination logic with a vengeance towards inferior others whether it is a race, women or environment (Barnhill, 2010, p. 487). He assumes the right to assimilate and exploit primitive Athsheans with "the power, the golden precision, and grandeur of star-bridging technology of Earth" (Barnhill, 2010, p. 487). Besides natives, other living beings cannot escape the exploitation that Terrans inflict upon them. An emblematic example to this is the hunting prohibition in Athshe. Davidson is asked by the ecologist Kees to stop the illegal hunting of red deers. Kees states that men have several recreational activities, so they do not have to "exterminate a rare native species for recreation" (Le Guin, p. 13). In response, Davidson says Kees just cares about "deer and trees and fireweed" but that he cares about people (Le Guin, p. 14). Davidson makes it seem that one must choose, you either care for the environment and all its animals, or about humans, who are at "the top," and "deer would be hunted because that's what they were there for" (Le Guin, p. 15). Through his efforts, "Athshe will turn into a paradise, a real Eden for man which is all cleaned from dark forests... for open fields of grain be a better world than worn-out Earth" (Le Guin, p. 2). Once Athshe is fully colonized; the forest, animals, plant, and the natives would be subjugated systematically to create an artificial Garden of Eden for Terrans.

Atshean territory represents the Garden of Eden for the Terrans. As descendants of Adam and Eve, they have the right to reclaim and recover what was rightfully theirs. Athsheans represent "snake" the Lucifer, who started the chain of events that caused the mankind's fall from Eden. That is why Davidson toys with the idea of naming Athsheans as "snake or rat" (p. 94) that should utterly be destroyed. Like nineteenth century's Manifest Destiny, which claimed that the master race had the divine right to expand westward as the will of God, the virtuous Terrans have a destiny of redeeming and remaking the world in the image of heaven and spread their civilization to the rest of the planet. Terrans remaking of the land also harbors a deep-seated and intimate fear in their psyche. Ehrenfeld argues that because of ecological alienation the deep-seated fear for the dark unknown and uncontrollability of nature has resurfaced itself (Ehrenfeld, 1978, p. 10). This groundless fear manifest itself by means of constant effort to control the dark nature. Davidson tries to keep everyone under control as a potential danger to himself and the civilization he is trying to build. He essentially represents the machismo of early explorers' who are afraid of nature and want to go into wilderness and conquer the unknown. In essence, this contest is a manifestation of Davidson's paranoia toward nature and the threat of unknown.

Ecologically conscious Terran, Raj Lyubov is the only human who truly understands Atshean's integration with nature: "the substance of their world was not earth, but forest" (p. 21). Yet, Lyubov was also scared of nature's dark side at the beginning. He felt "meaningless and indifferent" (p. 70) when Terrans first arrived to colonize the planet Athshe. He gradually establishes a romantic attitude towards nature that every entity has the right to exist, live out their lives and nobody is superior to the other. His admiration towards nature further grows when he realizes that the forest is the true home and a haven from all the corruption and exploitation of civilization. He becomes an "individual as component of the environment and through dreaming and singing therapy that Athsheans employ, Lyubov sees "the intoxicating odor of power" (p. 70). He forms strong bonds with Athshean leader Selver and tries to protect the Athshean planet from destructive ideology of Terrans: "a foreign plague, an infection" (p. 124). Later, Lyubov tries to convince League of World emissaries that the anthropocentric attitude has turned Alaska into a desert and same attitude would ruin the delicate ecology here as well: "If the forest perishes, its fauna may go with it. The Athshean word for world is also the word for forest" (p. 27).

The exploitative Davidson is a microcosm of capitalist attitudes of Terrans. He further represents ideal male of the patriarchy as his sexist and brutal attitude toward females of native Athsheans show: "only time a man is really and entirely a man is when he's just had a woman" (p. 30). Plumwood remarks "the denial of dependency to female body and nature lies at the root of western dualistic approach which led to the creation of human-nature and male-female binarism" (Plumwood, p. 40). Patriarchy tries to dominate nature and females in Davidson persona: "a big, hard-muscled man" who is looking forward to selecting the "Colony Brides" for his own sexual satisfaction (Le Guin, p. 11). His sole mission in the colony is to "tame the nature and natives of Athshe" (p. 9) and have "shipload of women, breeding females for the new colony to maintain prime human stock" (p. 9). Davidson's objectification of female body and description of them as "sexual cattle" that is left at the disposal of colonizers are all indications

of the patriarchal, masculine, and sexist culture of Terrans. He has raped and killed several female Athsheans, because: “they don’t feel pain like humans” (p. 19). Davidson is the so-called “master model”, who sees Athsheans as “passive, reproductive animals, contented cows” (p. 19). Women are perceived as “human-other” like its “nature-other” counterpart. Davidson heroically described his mission as civilizing primitive Athsheans: “to tame it” (p. 50). Davidson and Terrans “devalue the virtues for a more viable human relationship with nature” (Peter, 2002, p. 17). However, attitude towards nature is not any different than native females as a sexual intercourse is likened to “raping an animal” and cutting down the forest is nothing but “ending the darkness” (p. 58). Both nature and women are objects to be ravaged, exploited, and destroyed for the benefit of virile master model. Unlike the Terran colonizers who perceive female as an object to get sexual satisfaction from, Athshean women are strong and extremely respected as the city is governed by the head woman, Ebor Dendep. She sees the Terrans responsible for ecological destruction of their land. In response to Selver’s claim that Terrans are not planning to bring their women until the place is fit for them, Ebor Dendep says: “They should have sent the women first. They are insane” (p. 54). The head woman claims that Terran women cannot be as “insane” as their ecologically alienated man. Women could also relate themselves with otherized nature and fellow females.

The novella portrays the contrast in the human species between an imperialistic nature, which will stop at nothing to conquer and expand. Le Guin highlights the destructive nature of capitalist pursuits via the conflict between capitalist Terrans and exploited Athsheans. Eric Otto (2012) claims that “the central conflict of the novel demand a reading critical of the capitalistic mode of production and expansion” (Otto, 2012, p. 110). Capitalist Davidson sees the forests as an inexhaustible fund of resources and natives as slaves to be exploited. Marxist eco-criticism argues, “exploitation of the environment is responsible for the environmental crisis follows the capitalistic exploitation” (Bertens, 2008, p. 205). Terran capitalism does not only exploit non-human environment but enslaves and exploits Athshean labor as well. Exploitation of labor in Marxist terms become more obvious when Davidson refers to Athsheans as “labor of creechies”. (Le Guin, p. 17) Terrans are in Athsea to exploit natives by employing their detrimental technology while their labor is “more prized on Earth than gold” (p. 16). According to Otto, Davidson is a manifestation of the capitalistic mode the novel critiques, as he is “fed by a fetish for markets and the emptying of cultural and ecological meaning that turns people and places into objects of exchange” (Otto, 2012, p. 111). In an address to his lieutenants, Davidson says “be though with ‘em, and stay tough, they are treacherous” (Le Guin, p. 20). If the capitalist motives are served, their lives do not matter to colonizing Terrans. When Athshean laborers involve in a mutiny, a Hainish authority, Mr. Leponnan questions Davidson about his mistreatment of natives, Davidson defends himself saying that: “They were well fed, well housed, not overworked” (p. 68). However, Athsheans are exhausted from work, not fed enough and barely have time to sleep. In a sense, the mutiny is the ultimate revolution which challenges Terran’s capitalist ideology and exploitation of human labor.

The colonizer Terrans have left a devastated Earth behind and wage a war against eco-centered and peaceful Athsheans. Eco-criticism foresees that “everything is connected to everything else,” and “coexist, cooperate in the biosphere”, yet the anthropocentric use of science and technology not only harms non-human environment but also destroys man (Rueckert, p. 107). The most considerable ecological challenge to this traditional view is the concept of biocentrism, which means that human beings are neither better nor worse than, or neither superior nor inferior to other creatures in the world (Campbell, 1996, p. 128). Misuse of science and technology have had devastating results throughout the history and Le Guin shows that destructive bombs and weapons that Terrans possess are used against Athsheans to gain profit over human and non-human entities. As a manifestation of misused technology, and progress, Davidson drops a bomb which causes a big hole in the forest. He later threatens natives with bombs just to “prove superiority” (Le Guin, p.51).

Upon their mutiny, Selver has Davidson pinned down and disarmed but he finds himself unable to kill him. Roles and status have shifted in favor of Athsheans while anthropocentric rationality of Terrans is defeated. Their blindness towards nature, exploitation of non-human world, and humans have a tremendous cost for them. Athsheans were innately peaceful and non-aggressive who employed several methods to preempt their anger. They have never involved in a battle before and cannot help but ask each other: “Do men kill men, except in madness? Does any beast kill its own kind?” (p. 44). To them, violence towards a fellow being is not comprehensible. Upon Davidson’s capture, Selver says to him that he will “be taken to Rendlep where nobody lives and left there. Your people left no trees there” (p. 181). Selver reaffirms that when deprived of nature, life will be impossible. Due to Terran destruction, there is no living thing in Rendlep, and Davidson must bear the terrifying consequences of exploitation he had brought upon Athsheans. Ecology calls humanity to care for the diversity of life forms and this eco-centered approach of deep ecology is consistent with Athshean culture which embraces all member of nature and respect their rights of survival. The forests are Athsheans’ world and in fact “Athshe” means both forest and earth. Since Athsheans are a community of diversity, their intrinsic value for other forms in their planet is consistent with ecosystem. Their planet includes “the Forty Lands of the world” (p. 47). Each life form lives in harmony with each

other as the metaphor of “nerves” for the forest which “deviously” spreads around the earth as the nerves of human body. The natural world is fundamentally interrelated as “one element” (p. 42).

Singing is a way to suppress rage and establish communication with nature. The singing takes place when Davidson is captured by Selver, rather than exacting revenge by killing him, Selver “sings him down and lets him go” (p. 42). The violence is suppressed through singing not by “killing” (p. 180). Selver later says to Davidson that “You gave me a gift, the killing one’s kind, murder. Now, I give you my people’s gift, which is not killing” (p. 180). Both sides give what their counterpart lack: Terrans gave death, violence, and corruption while Athsheans shared respect, mercy, and compassion. The Terran humans see the forest as just wood to be shipped to Earth. However, to Athsheans, forest is a sacred being where all living forms inhabit, interact, and coexist. The rivers, animals, insects, and plants all have their souls and can feel the pain inflicted upon them. In Athshean language dream refers to “the root” as Athsea stands for forest and world. They identify and link themselves with nature as the trees are rooted in the forest.

2. CONCLUSION

The destruction of biosphere accelerated in terms of wars and genocides. When problems like the extinction of certain species, intoxication of natural resources, deforestation, irreversible damage to ozone layer, and global warming emerged, ecological awareness raised. As a response to growing fears, literary works have been an effective medium to raise ecological awareness and empathy towards biosphere. Le Guin fictional work is a significant attempt in this respect to respond to growing fears about nature and biosphere. The novel shows ecological alienation, capitalism, and exploitative attitude through Terran Davidson while ecological concerns are portrayed through Athshean natives. Throughout the novella, Le Guin tried to draw a sharp line between Athshean integration with nature and Terran’s destructive attitude. Though the Athsheans live in harmony with ecosystem, the Terrans plunder it by exhausting its most precious natural resource and its people. The attitude towards natural ecosystem is evident in the way they build their towns and dwellings which shows the complete integration with environment: the clans and towns are named after trees. For the Athsheans, for a person to have mental and physical health, he needs to be in touch with his roots. However, the Terrans’ violent culture is a result of alienation and disconnection from their roots. This contrast between Terran and Athshean attitude towards the biosphere is an example of a larger dialectical structure in the novella: Athsheans live in balance with their environment while Terran humans exploit and destroy it. Through the three main characters: Lyubov, Selver, and Davidson the historical attitude towards biosphere is represented. Davidson is an embodiment of the early explorers’ machismo who are afraid of nature, while Lyubov carries a romantic idea of the forest. Selver, on the other hand, lives in complete harmony with the nature. Le Guin shows a glimpse of hope for future by the ecologically conscious Athshean’s victory.

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